

**Chapter 18**  
**An Eyewitness Describes the Slave Trade in Guinea**  
(c. 1700)  
Captain Willem Bosman

**Introduction**

The transatlantic slave trade remains one of the great tragedies of world history. This horrific trade in human beings is richly described by the Dutch sea captain Willem Bosman; his description provides us with a detailed account of how this trade was conducted in the West African state of Guinea.

**Questions to Consider**

- From whom did Bosman acquire the slaves he traded for in Guinea? How did the process actually work?
- What were the conditions of those enslaved?
- Why did Bosman maintain that the Dutch slave ships were so much cleaner than those of other European states?

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Not a few in our country fondly imagine that parents here sell their children, men their wives, and one brother the other. But those who think so, do deceive themselves; for this never happens on any other account but that of necessity, or some great crime; but most of the slaves that are offered to us, are prisoners of war, which are sold by the victors as their booty.

When these slaves come to Fida, they are put in prison all together; and when we treat concerning buying them, they are all brought out together in a large plain; where, by our surgeons, whose province it is, they are thoroughly examined, even to the smallest member, and that naked both men and women, without the least distinction or modesty.

The invalids and the maimed being thrown out, as I have told you, the remainder are numbered, and it is entered who delivered them. In the meanwhile, a burning iron, with the arms or name of the companies, lies in the fire, with which ours are marked on the breast. This is done that we may distinguish them from the slaves of the English, French, or others (which are also marked with their mark), and to prevent the Negroes exchanging them for worse, at which they have a good hand. I doubt not but this trade seems very barbarous to you, but since it is followed by mere necessity, it must go on; but we yet take all possible care that they are not burned too hard, especially the women, who are more tender than the men.

We are seldom long detained in the buying of these slaves, because their price is established, the women being one fourth or fifth part cheaper than the men. The disputes which we generally have with the owners of these slaves are, that we will not give them such goods as they ask for them, especially the boesies [cowry shells] (as I have told you, the money of this country) of which they are very fond, though we generally make a division on this head, in order to make one part of the goods help off another; because those slaves which are paid for in boesies, cost

1 the company one half more than those bought with other goods.  
2 When we have agreed with the owners of the slaves, they are returned to their prison; where,  
3 from that time forwards, they are kept at our charge, cost us two pence a day a slave; which  
4 serves to subsist them, like our criminals, on bread and water: so that to save charges, we send  
5 them on board our ships with the very first opportunity, before which their masters strip them of  
6 all they have on their backs; so that they come to us stark-naked, as well women as men: in  
7 which condition they are obliged to continue, if the master of the ship is not so charitable (which  
8 he commonly is) as to bestow something on them to cover their nakedness.  
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10 You would really wonder to see how these slaves live on board; for though their number  
11 sometimes amounts to six or seven hundred, yet by the careful management of our masters of  
12 ships, they are so [well] regulated, that it seems incredible. And in this particular our nation  
13 exceeds all other Europeans; for as the French, Portuguese, and English slave-ships are always  
14 foul and stinking; on the contrary, ours are for the most part clean and neat.  
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16 The slaves are fed three times a day with indifferent good victuals, and much better than they eat  
17 in their own country. Their lodging place is divided into two parts; one of which is appointed for  
18 the men, the other for the women, each sex being kept apart. Here they lie as close together as it  
19 is possible for them to be crowded.